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ABSTRACT

Attitudes toward wheelchair users are the focus of the third of five booklets on attitudinal barriers toward disabled persons. Five myths (such as that people using wheelchairs cannot enjoy sex) are examined and common negative attitudes are portrayed in five scenes. The booklet concludes with suggestions for dealing with a wheelchair user (such as not automatically holding on to a person's wheelchair) and for general advocacy (such as encouraging the community to make curb cuts in the sidewalks). (CL)

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PREFACE

This booklet is the third in a series on attitudinal barriers facing disabled citizens. The first booklet, *The Invisible Battle: Attitudes Toward Disability,* discusses attitudinal barriers encountered by the disabled community in general. Booklet #2, *Beyond the Sound Barrier,* addresses barriers faced by hearing-impaired and deaf citizens.

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Members of the staff of the Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers who have contributed to this publication include: Sharon Mistler, Debra Cornelius, and Susan M. Daniels, Ph.D. Drawings are by Carol C. Netter.

—May 1978

INTRODUCTION

During the past few years a lot of attention has been focused on the rights of disabled people. Through legislation and efforts of many consumer groups, persons with disabilities have finally been recognized as valuable and equal members of society. One population which has been highly visible is the group using wheelchairs. Ramps are going up, doorways are being widened, and affirmative action is being taken. The physical barriers are coming down—slowly, but surely.

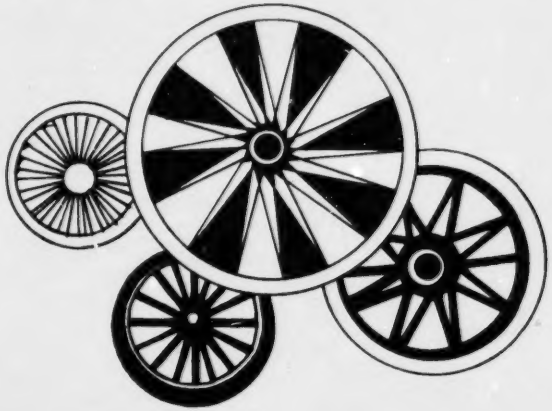
But what of the invisible barriers that still stand in the way of disabled citizens? Stereotyping and/or negative attitudes are still held by many individuals. These attitudes often obstruct independent, dignified life-styles for disabled citizens. The attitudes often arise from fear or simple lack of knowledge about disability. But, most importantly, these barriers go unrecognized, contributing to miscommunication.

This booklet will deal primarily with attitudinal barriers facing people who use wheelchairs: what the major barriers are, how to recognize them, and what you can do about them. We hope it will be helpful in breaking down the invisible barriers encountered by wheelchair riders.

THE POPULATION

It is estimated that at least 25 million persons have mobility problems. Of these, approximately 500,000 are wheelchair users. People use wheelchairs as a result of a variety of disabilities, including spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, cerebral palsy and polio. Wheelchairs provide mobility for persons with paralysis, muscle weakness, lack of coordination, nerve damage, and/or stiffness of joints.

Wheelchairs come in many sizes and shapes which are adapted to the lifestyle of the user. They range from custom-designed models for sports activities to basic utility models for use in hospitals and airports. Despite their active participation in our society, most wheelchair riders encounter attitudinal barriers which affect their lives on a daily basis.



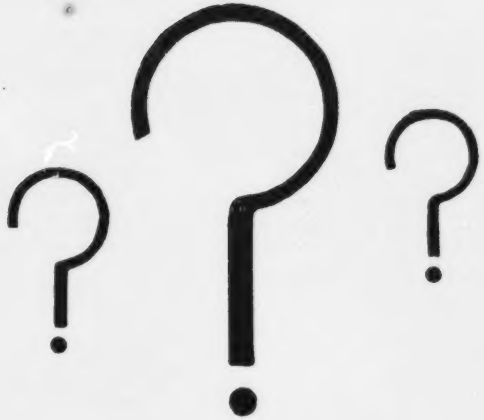
WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."

MYTH:
Wheelchair use is a tragedy.

FACT:
Wheelchair users do not lead lives of unhappiness and despair because they don't walk. Because of all the architectural barriers still existing (steps, narrow doors, etc.) wheelchair use is sometimes an inconvenience. For the most part, a wheelchair offers someone freedom. A wheelchair doesn't change someone's personality or necessarily change a lifestyle. Wheelchair users are employed as mechanics, race car drivers and farmers, as well as office workers. They are not, as a rule, saddened or preoccupied with the desire to walk.



MYTH:
It is rude for children to be curious or to ask questions about a wheelchair to a wheelchair user.

FACT:
Children often ask questions that adults are afraid to ask. Sometimes this makes the adults around them feel uncomfortable. Children pick up their attitudes from adults whom they respect. It is important that children not be discouraged from satisfying their curiosity about wheelchair use. Giving children the impression that discussing disability is bad can give rise to fear about wheelchairs and their users. A child's curiosity is a wonderful learning tool and wheelchair users are usually very willing to answer their questions to satisfy that curiosity.

MYTH:
People using wheelchairs cannot enjoy sex.

FACT:
Wheelchair use can result from many different disabilities. Some wheelchair users have normal sexual functioning (e.g., post-polio wheelchair riders). And some have limitations in sexual functioning because of their disability. But all wheelchair users can enjoy sexual relationships, no matter how severe the disability, if sexual activity is adapted to accommodate the disability. Some wheelchair users can conceive and bear children; some choose to adopt. But it is important to remember that wheelchair users, like other people, are sexual persons.

MYTH:
Wheelchair riders are sick.

FACT:
Use of a wheelchair does not automatically imply illness. Perhaps this myth has continued because of the use of wheelchairs in hospitals or the use of "pity campaigns" by telethons and charity organizations. Persons with different disabilities are wheelchair riders, many of whom have no accompanying health problems. One can come to use a wheelchair from an injury to the spinal cord, the effects of polio, or differences in bone structure at birth, as well as from a variety of diseases. But these conditions are absolutely *not* contagious. You can't "catch" a disability.

FIVE SCENES

12

Pete is looking for a job as a sales clerk. He applies at a department store with a complete resume indicating his experience in sales. The manager has a sales position open, but offers Pete a job in the accounts office, instead. Pete explains to the manager that his spinal cord injury and wheelchair use will not interfere with his ability to perform a sales job. The manager remains firm about her offer. Pete takes the job in the accounts office out of necessity.

The department store's manager shows us a common attitudinal barrier. She believed that Pete could not effectively work as a sales clerk because he no longer walks. She thought that a desk job was ideal for a wheelchair user because of the lack of physical strain involved. She may also fear that a sales clerk in a wheelchair would hurt business. The manager forgot about Pete's previous abilities as a sales clerk when she saw the wheelchair, and only thought about his disability. She should have hired Pete on the basis of his previous record, just as she would a nondisabled person, rather than offering him an unsuitable job.

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Free Wheeling

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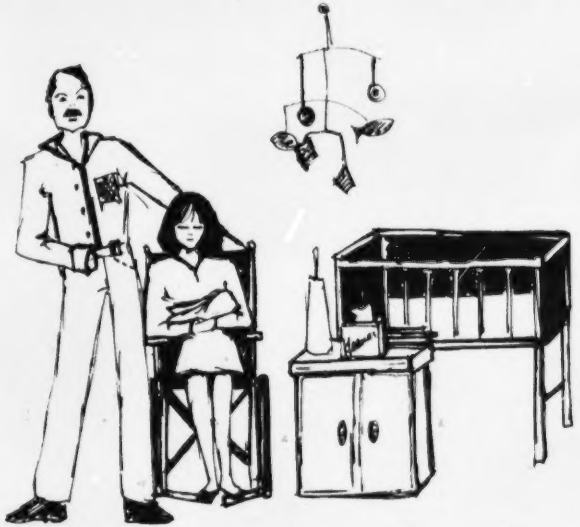
MYTH:
All wheelchairs users are paralyzed, and are "confined" to their wheelchairs.

FACT:
Not all wheelchair riders are paralyzed. Many wheelchair users can walk with the aid of canes, braces, crutches, and/or walkers. But it is easier for them to use a wheelchair—their ability and speed of movement is increased. Their wheelchair use does *not* mean they are faking a disability. People who use wheelchairs often transfer to cars and furniture. They are not "confined" to their wheelchairs.

Sally and Howard have been married for five years. They own their own home, are active in church and civic affairs, and have an ample savings account. Sally is a post-polio paraplegic who uses a wheelchair. As a homemaker, she uses techniques and modifications learned at a rehabilitation center. She does all the housework and errands, as well as preparations for entertaining. Sally and Howard decide that they would like to adopt a child. When they go to apply at the adoption center, the caseworker says they cannot take an application because Sally is a "dependent," herself.

Adults who use wheelchairs are like other adults, sitting down. Use of a wheelchair, in Sally's case, does not imply dependency, illness or instability. The caseworker, in refusing to even accept an application, made her stereotyping attitudes very apparent. She assumed that Sally could not be a competent mother because of her wheelchair use, and didn't even consider the financial and emotional stability of the family. The caseworker here failed in her job; she is supposed to find the best families for the children, not the best *able-bodied* families. The lives of people using wheelchairs need not be limited or unusual. Sally knew her abilities much better than the caseworker. Having been through a rehabilitation program, Sally learned how to adapt her homemaking skills to accommodate her disability. The caseworker, because of her negative attitude, automatically excluded a good and loving family for a child. Wheelchair users can, and do, adopt children.



Linda and Bob have been dating regularly for a long time. Bob uses a wheelchair. One of Linda's friends says to her, "Linda, I think you are a wonderful person for dating Bob for so long. I really admire you. But you're not going to marry him, are you? Do you really want to live the rest of your life without sex?"

In this example it is implied that a person would only date a wheelchair user out of pity or because it's a nice thing to do. The attitude is indicative that the person has not gone beyond the stereotype to see the person using the chair. The same personality exists, whether a person is standing or sitting. The second attitude shown is that disability prohibits sex. The wheelchair user is a person with the same feelings and desires as anyone else. The need to express one's sexuality is a very basic need. If, as in some cases, functional limitation exists, many avenues of sexual expression still remain open and are very fulfilling to both partners.

Joe, a quadriplegic, has just returned home from the rehabilitation center after his driving accident. He is talking with his family about the need to move glasses and dishes down to the lower shelves so that he can reach them. Modifications need to be made, such as lowering the rods in the closet so that he can reach his clothes. His wife responds, "But Joe, I can help yo reach all those things. It's so much easier for me to help you. It takes you so much time and energy."

Sometimes it's very hard for the friends and family of a newly-disabled person to accept that a disability does not result in dependence. Rather than adapting Joe's environment, Joe's wife indicated a desire to help him do ordinary tasks. Her well-meaning attitude put Joe in a dependent, helpless role. Wheelchair use does not prevent people from living normal lives. Adaptations can be made in the home or office that allow wheelchair users to be independent, active participants in society. Even though Joe's quadriplegia affects the speed and manner in which he performs tasks, he *can* do them and does not have to wait for assistance. Taking away self-sufficiency from individuals gives them the feeling that they are not useful, needed people. Of course, some wheelchair users may need help now and then. If so, they will ask for assistance. Wheelchair users have the right to live independent, active lives. Over-protective attitudes hinder much more than they help.

Jenny and Elaine, a wheelchair rider, are meeting for dinner at a French restaurant and then going to the ballet. Checking ahead, they discover that all the French restaurants have steps. There are none that are architecturally accessible. Disappointedly, they settle for a restaurant with no steps. Arriving at the theatre they find that the level entrance is at the back of the building and is locked. Jenny has to search for a person with a key to unlock the door, making them late for the performance.

Architectural barriers are caused by attitudes. Many architects, engineers and builders do not construct facilities with the wheelchair user in mind because they have not had much contact with people in wheelchairs. It's a vicious cycle: wheelchair users aren't seen many places in public because they can't get in; therefore nondisabled people don't often think about the barriers that they're creating. Wheelchair users have equal rights to access. These rights are now law. But sometimes even physically accessible places are not easily used, as above where the level entrance was locked. The events which occurred throughout Jenny's and Elaine's evening are not at all unusual, and turned a potentially fun activity into a frustrating experience. Awareness and sensitivity can reduce architectural barriers. The next time you're out to dinner, or at the theatre, think about how a wheelchair user could get around. Don't be afraid to bring accessibility up to the manager. You need not be disabled, yourself, to bring barriers to the attention of others. Let's make our facilities easier for *everyone* to use.

WHEN YOU MEET A WHEELCHAIR USER...

1. Do not automatically hold on to a person's wheelchair. It is part of the person's body space. Hanging or leaning on the chair is similar to hanging or leaning on a person sitting in any chair. It is often fine if you are friends, but inappropriate if you are strangers.

2. Offer assistance if you wish, but do not insist. If a person needs help (s)he will accept your offer and tell you exactly what will be helpful. If you force assistance it can sometimes be unsafe as when you grab the chair and the person using it loses his/her balance.

3. Talk directly to the person using the wheelchair, not to a third party. The person is not helpless or unable to talk.

4. Don't be sensitive about using words like "walking" or "running." People using wheelchairs use the same words.

5. Be alert to the existence of architectural barriers when selecting a restaurant, home, theatre or other facility you want to visit with a wheelchair user.

6. If conversation proceeds more than a few minutes and it is possible to do so, consider sitting down in order to share eye level. It is uncomfortable for a seated person to look straight up for a long period.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Don't park your car in a parking place which is reserved for use by disabled people. These places are reserved out of necessity, not convenience. The space is wider than usual in order to get wheelchairs in and out of the car and is close to the entrance for those who cannot push far.

2. When your church, civic group or organization sponsors a program, be sure disabled citizens are included in the planning and presentation.

3. When children ask about wheelchairs and their riders, answer them in a matter-of-fact manner. Wheelchairs, bicycles and skates share a lot in common.

4. When you hear someone use the term, "cripple," politely but firmly indicate your preference for the word "disabled."

5. If you wish to contribute to an organization that uses a "pity" or "sympathy" campaign, enclose a note with your check saying that the cause may be good, but the method of public appeal is demeaning to disabled citizens. Voice your disapproval of the "poor cripple" image.

6. When disabled citizens are presented in the media as competent, or "like other people," write a note of support to the producer or publisher.

7. Make sure meeting places are architecturally accessible (with ramps, modified bathrooms, wide doors, low telephones, etc.) so that wheelchair users can be equal participants.

8. Encourage your community to put "curb cuts" in sidewalks. These inexpensive built-in ramps enable wheelchair users to get from place to place independently.

9. Include wheelchair users on community task forces (transportation, building, zoning) so that your town will meet the needs of all citizens.

10. Make it a point to try to reduce barriers in transportation, housing, and entertainment facilities. Often these barriers are created by architects, engineers and builders who don't even think about wheelchair users. A simple "How could someone in a wheelchair get in here?" can sometimes bring this to their attention.

REFERENCES

The following is a brief list of materials which can enhance your knowledge of wheelchair users:

1. *Resource Guide to Literature on Barrier Free Environments with Selected Annotations*, available from Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, 333 C St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20201.
2. *Jobs for the Disabled,* Sar Levitan and Robert Taggart, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 21218.
3. *Sex & Disability,* Sophia Panieczko, Debra Cornelius and Wendy Frank, Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers, The George Washington University, 1828 L Street, N.W., Suite 704, Washington, D.C. 20036.

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